

Syrie Maugham (1879–1955): Pioneer of the Modern Decorative Interior

Born **Gwendoline Syrie Barnardo** in London on 10 July 1879, Syrie Maugham became one of the most influential interior decorators of the twentieth century. The daughter of the celebrated philanthropist Dr Thomas Barnardo, she married the writer **Somerset Maugham** in 1917, although their marriage was short-lived. Retaining the name by which she had become internationally known, she established a decorating practice that transformed domestic interiors in Britain, Europe and the United States.

At a time when Victorian interiors were still dominated by heavy furniture, dark wood and elaborate ornament, Syrie Maugham introduced a lighter, more relaxed aesthetic. Her signature was the celebrated "**All White Room**"—spaces composed almost entirely of shades of white, ivory, cream and pale grey. Walls, ceilings, painted furniture, upholstery and carpets were carefully coordinated to create rooms that reflected natural light and conveyed elegance without ostentation.

Her interiors were never plain. Texture was fundamental: lacquered furniture, mirrored surfaces, bleached woods, soft velvets, white-painted wicker, polished plaster, silk, linen and crystal combined to produce richness through material rather than colour. Carefully selected accents in silver, glass or gold prevented monochromatic schemes from appearing cold.

Among her most recognisable furniture designs were:

- Large upholstered sofas with deep comfort and generous proportions.
- Curved armchairs covered in pale linen or velvet.
- Mirrored consoles, cabinets and occasional tables that multiplied light.
- White-painted Regency and Gustavian-inspired furniture.
- Elegant plaster and painted wood lamps, often topped with simple silk shades.

Her interiors also incorporated carefully chosen antiques, Chinese porcelain, silver objects, books and flowers. Fresh white flowers—particularly lilies, roses and hydrangeas—became an important decorative element in many of her rooms.

Maugham's influence extended well beyond private houses. She decorated apartments for aristocrats, industrialists, actors and members of high society in London, Paris and New York. Her clients appreciated her ability to make even formal rooms feel comfortable and modern while retaining refinement.

She opened a successful decorating business in London's Mayfair and later published **The Book of Decorative Interiors** (1938), illustrating her philosophy that simplicity, proportion and quality of light were more important than excessive ornament. The book became an influential reference for both professional decorators and enthusiastic householders.

Although fashion moved towards stronger colours after the Second World War, Maugham's principles endured. Modern interior designers continue to draw inspiration from her restrained palette, layered textures, use of mirrors, painted furniture and appreciation of natural light. The contemporary preference for calm, neutral interiors owes much to the foundations she established during the 1920s and 1930s.

Syrie Maugham died on 25 March 1955, but her legacy remains secure. She demonstrated that white could be warm rather than clinical, luxurious rather than austere, and that carefully balanced interiors could achieve timeless elegance through restraint rather than excess. Her work marked an important transition from the richly furnished nineteenth-century interior to the fresh, sophisticated modern home, making her one of the defining decorators of the twentieth century.

Selected Characteristics of a Syrie Maugham Interior

- Monochromatic white, cream and ivory colour schemes.
- Exceptional use of natural and reflected light.
- Mirrored furniture and decorative glass.
- White-painted antique furniture.
- Comfortable upholstered seating.
- Fine textures replacing bold colour.
- Classical symmetry with relaxed informality.
- Fresh flowers and carefully edited accessories.

Today, original Syrie Maugham furniture and documented interiors remain highly sought after by collectors, museums and designers, who recognise her as one of the founders of modern interior decoration.

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